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The ever-changing meanings of retirement

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Shultz and Wang (April, 2011) draw attention to the ways in which understandings of retirement have changed over time, both in terms of the place of retirement in the lives of individuals and in terms of how retirement can no longer usefully be taken to comprise a single defining event. As the authors point out, psychological research has approached the study of retirement in a range of ways, including life span developmental perspectives, industrial/organizational approaches, and clinical and counselling studies. It is against this background that Shultz and Wang argue that psychology is well-placed to make a unique contribution to research on retirement, in taking forward three conceptualizations of retirement that can inform further work in this area, focusing on individual decision-making, the longitudinal development process that ultimately leads to retirement, and the interactions between individuals and their environments by which individuals shape their experiences of retirement.

Arguments such as those advanced by Shultz and Wang will certainly be attractive to psychologists in offering ways in which they can contribute to the study of experiences that increasingly are meaningful not only at a particular stage but also potentially throughout different phases of people's working lives (e.g. Alley & Crimmins, 2007). Yet, attempting to understand retirement in the terms that are proposed will almost inevitably leave central elements of retirement unaddressed, for two reasons. First, as Shultz and Wang themselves note, there is no clear consensus as to what retirement should be taken to comprise; thus, 'the designation of the retirement status is famously ambiguous because there are multiple overlapping criteria by which someone might be called retired' (Ekerdt, 2010, p. 70). Second, in so far as there is agreement, retirement is inherently a relational concept. As Denton and Spencer note, 'the problem is that what underlies the concept of retirement is the

essentially negative notion of attempting to define what people are *not* doing – namely that they are *not* working’ (2009, p. 74, original emphasis). Both of these factors pose challenges for any attempts to study retirement in the ways that Shultz and Wang propose.

On the first point, what we understand by retirement changed markedly over the course of the 20th century and continues to change (Alley & Crimmins, 2007; Shultz & Henkens, 2010). Rather than describing a particular transition from being in employment to an exit from the labour market at the end of working life, a description of retirement can be seen to include numerous forms of transition from work or certain types of work to other activities, to occur potentially at different stages of working life, and indeed to be compatible with other activities that contribute ‘to the well-being of the society’ (Denton & Spencer, 2009, p. 74). It is no surprise, then, that ‘researchers are unable to agree on a single definition of what constitutes retirement’ (Shultz & Wang, 2011, p. 177). Given that the concept of retirement is in flux over time, and moreover is open to widely divergent uses by different researchers, it becomes difficult to envisage how current models can usefully incorporate the range of factors that potentially bear upon ever changing understandings of retirement. In this respect, the evolving and divergent landscapes of retirement might well ‘create a wide opportunity for scholarship and research’ (Ekerdt, 2010, p. 69) but do so in ways that require researchers to be alert as to what is taken to be encompassed and bound up with the concept of retirement in any particular case.

With regard to the second point, it is now commonly accepted that retirement for want of more precise formulation is usually treated as marked by absence. Often, retirement

marks the absence of paid employment, although not necessarily so. Equally, retirement might signal the move from one form of absence from employment to another, for example from non-working through disability to not working on other grounds, or from non-employment to a cessation of seeking work. As cultural understandings of retirement change, so too do the forms of individual activity that come to be recognised as comprising retirement. Notwithstanding all such possibilities, however, the position remains that retirement comes to be identified in relation to other forms of activity, most commonly one of (not) working. To understand retirement, therefore, we require to consider it not in isolation as one set of possibilities but rather in relation to other social activities that carry somewhat different meanings but which go to shape retirement as understood in developmental or social terms.

The elements outlined above pose challenges for researchers in looking to develop models of retirement and to agree upon what psychologists (and others) might contribute to these discussions. We suggest however that there is at least one way of proceeding that attends to such issues while also offering a psychological perspective. Previous researchers (Ekerdt, 2010; Shultz & Henkens, 2010) have, albeit among other arguments, acknowledged the need for further qualitative research on these topics. Adopting a qualitative perspective, especially one that foregrounds how individuals themselves negotiate and make sense of their experiences, negates the onus on the researcher to attempt to provide models or definitions. Instead the focus comes to lie upon how individuals, with widely varying experiences and backgrounds, come to understand retirement and their actions in relation to it. More research needs to be done on this topic but previous study suggests that individuals draw upon work,

family circumstances, individual dispositions, and personal commitments in making sense of their themselves in relation to involvement or non-involvement in the labor market (McVittie, McKinlay & Widdicombe, 2008). These factors are however neither fixed nor static; individuals can use them flexibly in working up accounts of their lives and themselves that make sense in the contexts in which they live. Further work on these topics is essential if we as psychologists are to derive a rounded understanding of retirement in the early 21st century.

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